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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000263

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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: ECON KISL KWMN PREL SA SOCI

SUBJECT: JEDDAH JOURNAL 9: MEDINA IMAM SUSPENDED, FASHION SHOW, NON-ISLAMIC SYMBOL, STOCKS CONTINUE TO CAPTIVATE SAUDIS, AND TROUBLING VOICES FROM SAUDI MEDIA

REF: O5 JEDDAH 4994

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

IMAM SUSPENDED FOR OPPOSING WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

¶1. (C) Over the weekend rumors were circulating in Jeddah that the Imam of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the second largest in Saudi Arabia after the Haram in Mecca, was suspended on Friday by an official decree. The rumored reason for this suspension is that in his Friday sermon, he spoke disparagingly about women's rights and hailed the Shoura Council for refusing to discuss the issue of women driving.

THREE GRACES FASHION SHOW

¶2. (C) The Consul General recently attended a fashion show which casts a curious light on attitudes in Saudi Arabia. The models were non-professional Saudi and American women. The show started with a series of unveiled Saudi women wearing fashionable Saudi-designed clothes. The demure Saudi models resembled the typical idea of a fashion model: young, attractive, thin bordering on anorexic, and affecting a haughty demeanor which could be mistaken as dour. They sauntered down the runway to the accompaniment of blaring Arab music. The American women who followed presented a startling contrast. The three Americans, all members of the resident American community, were well past middle age and could not, even by the most charitable person present, be described by any word connoting thinness. Their march down the aisle was heralded by American music with a definite beat. After the American trio reached the stage, they began to dance with a vigor that could be considered wanton in a nation which frowns on all forms of theatricals. Astonishingly, these unseemly American dancers were quickly joined on stage by the previously melancholy Arab models who were soon smiling and gyrating in time to the music. Reform and self-expression may be slow in coming to Saudi Arabia, but it appears that many in Jeddah are only too ready to party.

UN-ISLAMIC SYMBOLS APPEAR IN JEDDAH

¶3. (C) In an effort to extirpate pagan and un-Islamic ideas from the Kingdom, imams frequently preach against irreligious symbols and festivals. Christmas and Valentine's Day receive

more than their share of these denunciations, because of the commercial publicity surrounding them. Nevertheless, as post has reported (reftel), occasional symbols of these "heretical" events creep into the Kingdom. Recently, at a forum sponsored by the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), for small businessmen interested in the effects of WTO on the business environment, Pol/Econ Chief chanced to observe among the refreshments an elegant, heart-shaped cake covered in red frosting and decorated with delicate red roses and green leaves. While this suggests that the JCCI and/or the caterer had no qualms about displaying the universally recognized symbol of a pagan festival, it may also have demonstrated the effectiveness of the religious prohibition, since this creation did not appear at table until late March. Pol/Econ Chief did not have the time, nor it must be confessed, the stomach to determine if this symbol of pagan lust was freshly baked or the discounted remnant of a baker's unsuccessful attempt to cash in on the previous holiday.

STOCK MARKET ECLIPSING ALL OTHER SUBJECTS FOR CONVERSATION

¶4. (C) Although the Saudi stock market has been experiencing oscillations that have put-off a portion of the population, it remains the prime topic of conversation, to the exclusion of almost all else. At a recent dinner engagement, the CG was told by a woman that she was becoming tired of the stock market monopolizing all debate. Whereas, the woman recalled, only a few months ago, dinner talk was filled with debate about the prospects for and direction of reform, women driving, and the new king, now she complained, all anyone talked about was the stock exchange and share prices.

JEDDAH 00000263 002 OF 002

STOCK EXCHANGE DOMINATES THE OFFICE, AS WELL

¶5. (C) Pol/Econ Chief received similar evidence that the stock market craze has not been dimmed by the recent fluctuations experienced by the exchange. He recently met with the senior staff of the Presidency of Meteorology and Environment in Jeddah, in the office of the Vice President. This official's office contained a wall with five television sets set in it. The televisions were tuned to a variety of local and international cable stations. Perhaps it was random, but the large-screen television in the center of the display was tuned to the stock quotations. And it seemed that several of the officials present at the periphery of the discussion cast furtive glances at the screen every now and then.

WEBSITE ACCUSES U.S. EMBASSY OF BRIBING JOURNALISTS

¶6. (C) On March 28, the Arabic-language web-site Sahat contained an exchange that accused the U.S. Embassy of bribing journalists and planting stories in the media. A very rough translation of the dialogue is:

March 28 Abu Khawla:

The U.S. Embassy and the agents in Saudi Arabia:
Here I will put the latest flash news about the dangerous fact that some of our patriotic people have been paid by the Embassy. I am referring to writers, journalists and some high caliber people. Tomorrow is very soon (which refers that the truth will come out soon.)
At present, there is a boiling debate running between one of the preachers and a writer concerning the issue of donations and gifts from the American Embassy.
For whom, what role do they play and what kind of danger will harm us, present and future?

Saqr Al Riyadh replied: I don't believe it.

Allwazaei added: In some countries, like Egypt for instance, they leaked their news. In our own country, not yet. Why

don't we start the exposure? Let's start with editors-in-chief. They are easily exposed.

NEWSPAPER COMMENTARY BEMOANS HATE-FILLED SAUDI SOCIETY.

¶7. (C) In a commentary in the March 27 edition of the ARAB NEWS, titled "Why Is There So Much Hate Inside Us?" writer and teacher Abdullah Al-Mutairi bewails the hate and cruelty exhibited by Saudi society. He relates stories of foreign residents, including Muslims, being harassed and beaten by Saudi youths. Youths in his class confess that they derive pleasure from attacking foreigners and abusing animals. He also recounts incidents in which adults denigrate and shun those from different regions or tribes. He describes a teacher colleague who insisted "that a student lacking a tribal name is a man with no roots and hence of no importance." He also tells of an imam who warned students after 9-11 not to deal with non-Muslims. Al-Mutairi comments these "beliefs and thoughts toward 'others' which glorify us and our egos and degrade them and others. Such a situation is fertile ground for the idea of hate and infertile ground for the idea of love." Comment: This distressing article accentuates that Saudi Arabian society continues to be xenophobic, intolerant, and violent and substantial educational and social reform must occur before this society will accept outsiders on a basis of equality. End Comment.
Gfoeller